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Johnson's Video Show: Some Fascinating Views
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The Johnson Museum is playing host to the third annual Ithaca Video Festival this week through May first. Supported by the Ithaca Video Project and the New York State Council on the Arts, the festival consists of 21 videotapes, one video monitor and eight folding chairs arranged in two rows in front of the monitor.
The tapes being presented were selected from submissions from all over, the country. The selection panel consisted of Ed Emshwiller, a noted filmmaker, Gunilla and Philip Mallory Jones of the Ithaca Video Project and Jason Wong, assistant curator at the Johnson Museum. Nearly half the tapes are from the New York City area.

The work ranges from fascinating to not so fascinating, although I confess to not sitting through the whole presentation. Three consecutive hours were quite enough for one day; comments on what I missed on this go-round will appear in Saturday's INSIDE section.

"Curiosity Killed the Cat" by Kroy Dey Rubin of Williamsville, N.Y., is a 22 minute black and white tape typical of student statements about immediate environments: young man, cat, apartment and hand held camera wandering through said apartment touching on the bed, on the floor, a bicycle leaning against a wall, various cluttered corners, his equipment, etc. etc. The sweeping around rooms, zooming in and out on vignettes, a paper cup squash sequence and some reflections of the artist in the mirror were boring. However, as the film neared completion, his final statement was interrupted (intentionally), by static, slurring images; and a strange sound ... much to the dismay of one of the museum aids who tried to adjust the machine.

"Road Kills," a 15-minute color tape by Tobe J. Carey of Willow, N.Y., shows us an array of dead animals alongside a highway or stuck tragically to the blacktop, suffering again and again the treachery of the wheels whizzing by it. This is interrupted by the image of a person digging holes in a field (graves?): the sounds of the forest cutting into the sounds of the highway.

A shorter color tape called "Migration" by Bill Viola of New York City presents us with a scene of a man at a table. The perspective changes and an almost cubist movement of images occurs as the table top becomes tipped up to reveal a bowl, cereal box and a couple of oranges. As the perspective changes we see it as Corn Flakes and that the bowl is full of liquid. Another change reveals the man's face reflected in the bowl. The reflection is disturbed by water dripping from a spigot above the table; moving in we see the reflection of the man in the drops emerging from the spigot and so forth. All this is accompanied by the plaintive tolling of a bell. A short, but compelling little piece.

"From Cheektowaga to Tonawanda" by Steina Vasulka of Buffalo is a real "trip." For 36 minutes we view the title expedition in three chapters, each segment utilizing great diversity in color and definition. At one point the moving scene is upside down and one gets the sensation of swimming underwater and looking up at the surface. When the film slows down to a stop, colors crystallize and group in psychedelic array. The camera views the passing scenes from side and rear as well as head on. This changing viewpoint is carried further in the other chapters by using a coupling of near/far, up/down, left/right, and front/back. At times this juxtaposition allows for the broken white line in the center of the highway to take on a pulsating or dancing motion and be the only focal point that holds true. The combination of zooming in and out and the change of tempo to a flickering of images creates at times a double drum movement like early movie viewers: such bravura, but indeed almost too long to hold the visitors attention without tiring him.

Of the tapes I saw my favorite was doubtless "Graffiti People" by Elizabeth Wiener, I won't spoil it for you by revealing details but it succeeds not only as a documentary work but also as an art form commenting on another art form.

A few words now about the presentation itself. I was aggravated to no end that four aides-to-be were being instructed on the use of the cassettes during the time that three pieces were aired. Interrupting also was a reception being held at the other end of the space, behind the seats, cups and saucers clattering and competing with the electronic output.

Concentration is hard to come by in such a setting. The festival would do better to present itself in a room off the hall rather than in the mainstream of activity. It would have been nice also to have had several monitors available in different areas, so that the visitor would not have to sit through the whole presentation but could switch as it were from 'channel to channel.'

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